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AUTHOR Kerka, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

Popular education is a form of adult education that encourages learners to examine their lives critically and take action to change social conditions. Popular education's goal is to develop people's capacity for social change. Although it may assume diverse forms, popular education usually involves a cycle described as action/reflection/action or practice/theory/practice. Adult educators can facilitate the process by serving as democratic collaborators who ensure that learning, leadership, and self-direction occur in the group. Popular education often draws on popular culture (such as song, theater, dance, puppetry) to enhance communication among audiences, demonstrate respect for community values, enhance group spirit, and demystify the information conveyed. Because popular education is often seen as threatening to dominant institutions, popular educators face numerous challenges, including the following: demands or constraints of funding sources; perceptions of the role of facilitators; disconnection between program goals and participant objectives; and the perception that it is too radical or revolutionary. The literature includes several examples of how adult educators have overcome these challenges and helped facilitate social transformation. The examples demonstrate that, although individual popular education programs may appear to have failed in their immediate goals, they may represent steps in the slow, complex and cumulative process of social change. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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Sandra Kerka

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

CE 074701

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

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Popular Education: Adult Education for Social Change

Popular education is a form of adult education that encourages learners to examine their lives critically and take action to change social conditions. It is "popular" in the sense of being "of the people." Popular education emerged in Latin America in the 1960s-1970s; Paulo Freire is its best known exponent. However, its roots may be found in the French Revolution, in workers' education of the 1920s-1930s, and in such movements as the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee (Beder 1996; Jeria 1990). The goal of popular education is to develop "people's capacity for social change through a collective problem-solving approach emphasizing participation, reflection, and critical analysis of social problems" (Bates 1996. pp. 225-226). Key characteristics of popular education are as follows: everyone teaches and learns, so leadership is shared; starting with learners' experiences and concerns; high participation; creation of new knowledge; critical reflection; connecting the local to the global; and collective action for change (Arnold et al. 1985; Mackenzie 1993). This digest describes popular education methods, addresses challenges, and offers some insights for adult educators.

The Popular Education Process

Because it is strongly community based, popular education takes a wide variety of forms. However, the process usually follows a pattern or cycle described as action/reflection/action (Arnold and Burke 1983) or practice/theory/practice (Mackenzie 1993). Beginning with people's experience, the community initiates problem identification; then they reflect on and analyze the problem, broadening it from local to global in order to develop theory; next, participants plan and carry out action for change. Adult educators can facilitate the process by serving as democratic collaborators who ensure that learning takes place and leadership and self-direction develop in the group (Arnold and Burke 1983). Facilitators keep the group on track and encourage participation, but they should also try to foster a longer-term perspective on the problems addressed, helping the group place the issues in social, historical, and political context (Bates 1996).

One important aspect of popular education is the way it often draws on popular culture, using drama, song, dance, poetry, puppetry, mime, art, storytelling, and other forms. Proulx (1993) distinguishes "popular culture" from cultural institutions often perceived as elitist and from instruments of mass culture such as the media, identifying popular cultural forms as those in which "working class adults recognize their life and their values" (p. 39). The use of these forms can enhance communication among audiences with an oral tradition, demonstrate respect for community cultural values and enhance group spirit, demystify the information conveyed and make it accessible and relevant, and encourage participation and learning by appealing to different modalities (Bates 1996; Proulx 1993).

Arnold and Burke (1983) recommend the use of a variety of techniques for popular education, based on the assumption that learning is most effective if participation is active, different learning styles are addressed, content is relevant to learners' lives, learners are treated as equals, and the learning process is enjoyable. Examples include theatre—participants act out a situation from real life experience using words, movement, gestures, and props; drawing—which appeals to those with a strong visual learning style and helps crystalize or symbolize ideas; and sculpturing—people physically position themselves in ways that depict their understanding of an issue or theme.

Challenges to Popular Education

Popular education is often seen as different from, threatening to, or marginalized by dominant institutions. Popular educators thus face a number of challenges illustrated in the examples that follow (Beder 1993; Walters and Manicom 1996): the demands or constraints of funding sources (Zacharakis-Jutz, Heaney, and Horton 1991); perceptions of the role of facilitators (Merideth 1994; Zacharakis-Jutz et al. 1991); disconnection between program goals and participant objectives (Stromquist 1997); failure to address gender issues (ibid.); and the perception that popular education is too radical or revolutionary (ibid.).

Describing how university-based adult educators can play a role in facilitating community learning, Zacharakis-Jutz et al. (1991) give examples of successful and unsuccessful popular education efforts at the Lindeman Center at Northern Illinois University. Instead of acting as experts, educators demonstrated their view of the community as co-researchers and co-learners by assisting public housing residents in developing their own capacity for leadership and their own knowledge about tenant management. On the other hand, an attempt to develop an intergenerational home repair cooperative in an impoverished neighborhood failed because facilitators neglected community-based needs assessment and strategy development and because a city agency that provided funding imposed "top-down" decision making and insisted on selecting participants.

Facilitators of Casa en Casa, a project in an Hispanic health clinic, sought to train community volunteers to be health promoters in their neighborhoods. However, volunteers did not assume leadership roles or organize for collective action because they received no orientation to the purpose of training or the role of promoters. Training emphasized content knowledge but not the skills to use it for community action. Overly concerned with imposing their own agenda, project facilitators abdicated their responsibility to guide the learning process. As Merideth puts it, "starting where the people are does not mean staying there" (p. 365).

A popular education program in Paulo Freire's own city, São Paulo, Brazil, sought to develop citizenship for the radical transformation of political and social structures through literacy education (Stromquist 1997). However, civic and political content was infrequently addressed and discussions were not always tied to learners' understanding of how the subjects affected their lives. "There was a substantial disjunction between efforts to make them discuss political issues in class and the type of political discourse they engaged in in daily life" (p. 114). Although most of the facilitators and participants were women, the program did not explicitly address gender issues.

Although the overall objective was increasing citizen participation, this goal was not strongly connected to the objectives of participants, many of whom were primarily interested in social interaction or satisfaction of personal needs. Ultimately, the program encountered—and was terminated by—a major obstacle of popular education: opposition of political groups threatened by an agenda of social change.

Insights for Adult Educators

How can adult educators address these challenges to popular education? Stromquist (1997) recommends that community needs and goals should form the basis for a popular education agenda and that facilitators should be trained in critical dialogue that blends political content with instructional practices and connects the issues with participants' immediate reality.

Beder (1993) maintains that "power is a critical resource . . . because change cannot be accomplished without power" (p. 80). However, power must be owned by the group, but exercised by individuals on behalf of it. Facilitators should neither impose an agenda nor abdicate responsibility. They should recognize that merely incorporating participatory learning techniques and democratic structures does not necessarily enable people to challenge their internalized beliefs and develop critical abilities, and they should have a clear vision of social change and how their work fits into the broader picture (Merideth 1994). Zacharakis-Jutz et al. (1991) conclude that the role of university-based educators is not to precipitate action but to support actions the community takes on its own behalf. They suggest finding ways in which university resources can work for the community.

Merideth (1994) notes how popular education programs may be constrained by the mandates and regulations of funding sources. Heaney (1992) reinforces the pitfalls associated with public funding, suggesting that popular educators keep the proportion of public funds in the overall budget low, form an umbrella organization to channel funds, or "promote and support indigenous resources within the community, helping local groups to build strong organizations under local control" (p. 25).

Stromquist (1997) emphasizes that empowerment and emancipation are not generic: they have different meanings and implications for men and women. Gender relations must be part of the analysis of power relations and social conditions that takes place in popular education. Walters and Manicom (1996) recommend strategies that take women's standpoint, drawing on women's experiences in a way that illustrates that "woman" is not a homogeneous category; explore the intersection of gender, race, class, and culture; and enable women to find space, time, and a place for learning.

Popular education is not limited to addressing the needs of identifiable cultural groups or the poor and the powerless (Bates 1996). It has wider application as a method of developing critical understanding, building self-confidence and analytical skills, and linking them with social action in a variety of contexts and socioeconomic levels.

Education that has as its goal social transformation faces formidable challenges, as shown by some the programs described here. However, education for social transformation is an ongoing effort. Although a particular program may appear to have failed in its immediate goals, it may represent one step in the slow, complex, and cumulative process of social change.

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